

The Bronze Bell

By Louis Joseph Vance



put away this Token, lest a more terrible thing befall us. There be mysteries that even we of the initiate may not comprehend, my lord. It is not well to meddle with the unknown."

The ring was off his finger now and the woman was cramming it into his coat pocket with tremulous hands. And where the eye had shown, the sky was blank. They stood in darkness. Amber mute in perplexity, Naraini clinging to his arm and shaking like a reed in the wind.

"Now am I frightened, lord of my heart! Lead me back to the garden, for I am but a woman and afraid. Who am I, Naraini, to see the eye? What am I, a weak woman, to trespass upon the mysteries? I am very much afraid. Do thou take me hence and comfort me, my king!" She drew his arm about her waist, firm, round, and slender, and held it so, her body yielding subtly to his, her head drooping wearily upon his shoulder.

They moved slowly from the turret and back along the lighted walks of the garden, the woman apparently content, Amber preoccupied—to tell the truth, more troubled than he would have been willing to confess.

"See now how thou art altogether converted, Lalji!" she cried joyfully. "No longer canst thou persist that thou art other than thy true self, the lord of Naraini's heart, the king returned to his kingdom. . . . For who would dare to give the lie to the Eye? Indeed," she continued with a low, sighing laugh, "I myself had begun to doubt, my faith borne down and overcome by thy repeated denials; but now I know thee. Did not the Bell



Pausing, the Native Beckoned to One Who Skulked Without.

foretell that the Eye should be seen of men only when Har Dyal Rutton had returned to his kingdom, and then only when he wore the Token? Even as it was said, so has it been. . . . And now art thou prepared to go?"

"Whither?"

"To Kathiawar—even to the threshold of the Gateway? . . . There is yet time, before the dawn, and it were wise to go quickly, my king; but for one night more is the Gateway open to receive thee. Thou didst see the saddled stallions in the courtyard? They wait there for thee, to bear thee to Kathiawar. . . . Nay, it were better that thou shouldst wait, mayhap, for the hours be few before the rising of the sun. Go then to thy rest, heart of my heart, since thou must leave me; and this night we shall ride, thou and I, together to the Gateway."

"So be it," he assented, with a grave inclination of the head. Convinced of the thanklessness of any further attempt to convince the woman against her will, he gave it up, and was grateful for the respite promised him. In twelve or eighteen hours he might accomplish much—with the aid of Labertouche. At worst he would find some means to communicate with the Parrelis and then seek safety for himself in flight or hiding until what he had come to term "that damned gateway-thing" should be closed and he be free to resume his strange wooing. Some way, somehow, he could contrive to extricate himself and his beloved.

Therefore he told the woman: "Be it so, O queen. Now I go."

"And leave me," she pouted prettily, "with no word but that, my king? Am I not worth a caress—not even when I beg for it?"

He smiled down at her, tolerant and amused, and impulsively caught her to him. "The point's well taken," he said. "Decidedly, you're worth it, Naraini. And if you were not, the show was!"

And he kissed and left her, all in a breath.

CHAPTER XVI.

Sunrise for Two.

Amber found his way out of the garden without difficulty; at the doorway an eunuch waited. The maharajah himself, perhaps in deference to the distance of discretion, did not respond, and Amber had no desire to see him again. He was eager only to get away, to find a place and time to think, and to get into communication with Labertouche.

In the cavern-like chamber at the water level Dulla Dad had the best in readiness. Amber embarked, not without a sigh of relief, and the maharajah with his double-headed gaddie drove the boat out of the secret entrance, in an impassive silence.

In the stern Amber watched the indelible grey light of dawn wavering over the face of the waters and wondered. . . .

The boat swung in gently to the marble steps of the bund. Amber rose and stepped ashore, very tired and very much inclined to believe he would presently wake up to a sane and normal world.

"Hooray," the voice of Dulla Dad hailed him. He turned. "Hooray, I was to say that at the third hour after sunset tonight this boat will be waiting. You are to call me by name, and I will put in for you, hooray."

"What's that? I don't understand."

"Oh, very well."

"And I was to say further, my lord, these words: 'You shall find but one way to Kathiawar.'"

Amber shook his head, smiling. "If you don't mind getting yourself disliked on my account, Dulla Dad, you may take back to the author of that epigram this answer: 'You shall find but one way to Jehannum, and that right speedily.' Good morning, Dulla Dad."

"The peace of God abide always with the heaven-born!"

Amber entered the bungalow, to find the khansamah already awake and moving about. At the Virginian's request he shuffled off to prepare coffee—much coffee, very strong and black and hot, Amber stipulated. He needed the stimulant badly. He was sleepy and his head was in a whirl.

He sat lost in thought until the khansamah brought the decoction, then roused and drank it as it came from the pot, without sugar, gulping down huge bitter mouthfuls of the scalding black fluid. But the effect that he expected and desired was strangely long in making itself felt. He marveled at his drowsiness, nodding and blinking over his empty cup. Out of doors the skies were hot and blue-white with forerunners of the sun, and the world of men was stirring and making preparations against the business of the day; but Amber, who had a work so serious and so instant to his hand, sat on in dreamy lethargy, musing. . . .

The faces of two women stood out vividly against the misty, formless void before his eyes: the face of Naraini and that of Sophia Farrell. He looked from one to the other, stupidly contrasting them, trying to determine which was the lovelier, until their features blurred and ran together and the two became as one. . . .

The khansamah tiptoed cautiously into the room and found the Virginian sleeping like a log, his head upon the table. His face was deeply colored with crimson, as if a fever burned him, and his breathing was loud and stertorous.

Pausing, the native beckoned to one who skulked without, and the latter entering, the two laid hold of the unconscious man and bore him to the charpoy. The second native slipped silver money into the khansamah's palm.

"He will sleep till evening," he said. "If any come asking for him, say that he has gone abroad, leaving no word. More than this you do not know. The sepoys have an order to prevent all from entrance."

II.

Beneath the spreading banian, by the cistern of the goldfish, Naraini disappeared in the wilderness of shrubbery. He walked as a man with a set purpose, never glancing back. She laughed uneasily but waited motionless where he had left her, until the echo of his boot-heels on the marble slabs had ceased to ring in the neighboring corridor. Then, lifting a flower-like hand to her mouth, she touched her lips gently and with an air of curiosity. The resentment in her eyes gave place to an emotion less superficial. "By Indur and by Hari!" she swore softly. "In one thing at least he is like a rajput; he kisses as a man kisses."

The east was gray with dusk of dawn—a light that grew apace, making garish the illumination of the flickering, smoking, many-colored lamps in the garden. Naraini clapped her hands. Soft footsteps sounded in the gallery and one of her handmaids threaded the shrubbery to her side.

"The lamps, Unda," said the queen; "their light, I think, little becomes me. Put them out." And when this was done, she composedly ordered her pipe and threw herself lastly at length upon a pile of kinob cushions, her posture the more careless since she knew herself secure from observation; the garden being private to her use.

The tread of boots with jingling spurs sounded in the gallery, warning her. She sighed, smiled dangerously to herself, and carefully adjusted her veil, leaving rather more than half her face bare. Salig Singh entered the garden and found his way to her, lowering over her beneath the canopy, brave in his green and tinsel uniform. She looked up with a little hesitancy that expressed her attitude toward the man.

"Achehal!" she said, sharply. "Thou art tardy, heaven-born. Yet here I waited for thee this half-hour gone, heavy with sleep though I be—waited to know the pleasure of my lord."

There was a mockery but faintly disguised in her tone. The maharajah seemed to find it not unpleasant, for

he smiled grimly beneath his mustache.

"There was work to be done," he said briefly—"for the cause. And thou—how has thou wrought, O Breaker of Hearts?"

The woman clasped her hands behind her head. "Am I not Naraini?"

"The man is ours?"

"Mine," she corrected amiably. His face darkened with a scowl of jealousy and she laughed in open derision. Were Naraini could I not divine the heart of a man?"

"By what means?"

"What is that to thee, O heaven-born?" She snuggled her body complacently into the luxurious pile of cushions. "If I have accomplished the task thou didst set for me, what concern hast thou with the means I did employ? Thou art only Salig Singh, maharajah of Khandawar, but I am Naraini, a free woman."

"Thou—!" Rage choked the rajput. "Thou—!" he sputtered—"thou art—!"

"Softly, heaven-born, softly—lest I loose a thunderbolt for thy destruction. Is it wise to forget that Naraini holds thy fate in the hollow of her hands?" She sat forward, speaking swiftly and with malice. "Thou art pledged to produce Har Dyal Rutton in the Hall of the Bell before another sunrise, and none but Naraini knows to what a perilous resort thou art driven to redeem thy word."

"I was lied to," he argued sullenly. "A false tale was brought me—by one who hath repented of his error! If I was told that Har Dyal Rutton would be in India upon such-and-such a day, am I to blame that I did promise to bring him to the Gateway?"

"And seeing that the man is dead, art thou to blame for bringing in his place a substitute, even so poor a changeling as this man Amber? Nay, be not angry; do I blame thee? Have I done aught but serve thee to the end thou dost desire? . . . Thou shouldst be grateful to me, rather than menace me with thine anger. . . . And," she added, sweetly, "it were well for thee that thou shouldst bear away in mind my intimacy with thy secret. If thou art king, then I am more than queen, in Khandawar."

"I am not angry, Naraini," he told her humbly, "but mad with love for thee."

"And just, my lord, for—power," she interpolated.

"But if what thou has said be true—"

"Who lies to the king, is already a dead man. Why should I trouble to deceive thee, heaven-born? I tell thee, the man is won. The day shall declare it; this night will he ride with me to Kathiawar. Why didst thou not tarry to eavesdrop? Indeed thou hast lost an opportunity that may never a second time be thine—to learn of the wiles of a woman."

"There was work to be done," he repeated. "I went to take measures against thy failure."

"O thou of little faith!"

"Nay, why should I neglect proper precautions? Whether thy confidence be justified or not, this night will Har Dyal Rutton—or one like him—endure the ordeal of the Gateway."

"So I have told thee," she assented equally. "He will come, because Naraini bids him."

"It may be so. If not, another lure shall draw him."

She started with annoyance. "The Englishwoman of the picture?"

"Have I named her?" He lifted his heavy brows in affected surprise.

"Nay, but—"

"Secret for secret," he offered; "mine for thine. Is it a bargain, O Pearl of Khandawar?"

"Keep thy silly secret, then, as I will keep mine own counsel," she said, with assumed disdain. It was no part of wisdom, in her understanding, to tell him of her interview with Amber. A man's jealousy is a potent weapon in a woman's hands, but must be wielded with discretion.

"Be of good heart," she comforted him. "If he doth fail to survive the ordeal—Har Dyal Rutton hath died. If he doth survive—"

"Har Dyal Rutton shall die within the hour," Salig Singh concluded, grimly. "But . . . I am troubled. I cannot but ask myself continually: Were it not wiser to confess failure and abide the outcome?"

"How long wouldst thou abide the outcome, my king, after thou hadst informed the council of this deception to which thou hast been too willing and ready a party? . . . He who misled you died a dog's death. But thou—art thou in love with death?"

"Unless thy other name be Death, Naraini . . ."

"Or if the council should spare thee—as is unlikely? The patience of the Body is as the patience of kings—scarce; and its mercy is like unto its patience. . . . But say thou art spared; what then? How long art thou prepared to wait until the Members of the Body shall again be in such complete accord as now? When again shall all Hindustan be ripe for revolt? . . . Ah! Thou wouldst have sweet patience in the waiting, Salig Singh! . . . Let matters rest as they be, my lord—this a trace imperiously. 'Leave the man to me; I stand sponsor for him until the Gateway shall have received him—and perhaps for a little afterwards.'"

"Thou art right as ever." He lifted his gaze to meet hers and his eyes flamed. "I leave my life on your knees, Naraini. I love thee and . . . by all the gods, thou art altogether a woman!"

"And thou . . . a man, your highness?" she countered provocatively. "Nay!" she concluded, waving him with a supple squint. "No content until this affair be consummated. Wait until the time when an emperor shall reign over all Bharata and then, my lord, shall he be minister of state."

The man's voice sank. "That how

is not far off, my queen. Thou wilt not keep me waiting longer!"

She gave him the quick promise of her eyes.

She swept away from him, toward the parapet. He took a single step in pursuit and halted, following her with a glance that was at once careless and a threat.

With eyes half-closed by long languorous lashes the woman threw back her head until her swelling throat was tense. She raised her arms and

stretched them wide. The sun, soaring suddenly, a crimson disk above the ridge, seemed to strike fire from her strange, savage beauty as from a jewel.

Her parted lips moved, but the man, who had drawn near enough to hear, caught two words only.

"Naraini! . . . Empress!"

CHAPTER XVII.

The Way to Kathiawar.

Gall and wormwood in his mouth, more bitter than remorse, Amber became conscious. Or perhaps it were more truly to say that he struggled out of unconsciousness, dragging his ego back by main will-power from the deep oblivion of drugged slumber. One by one his faculties fought their way past the barrier, until he was fully sentient, save that his memory drowsed. His head was hot and heavy, his eyes burned in their sockets like balls of live charcoal, a dulled buzzing sounded in his ears, his very heart felt sore and numb; he was as one who wakes from evil dreams to the blackness of foreknowledge despair.

Suddenly he raised himself upon the charpoy and called huskily for the khansamah. Promptly the squat white figure that he remembered appeared in the doorway. "Bring lights," Amber ordered, peremptorily. "Bring lights quickly—and water." And when the man had returned with a lamp, which he put on the table, Amber seized the red earthenware water-jug and drained it greedily. Returning it, empty, to the brown hands, he motioned to the man to wait, while he consulted his watch. It had run down. He thrust it back into his pocket and inquired: "What's o'clock?"

"Eight in the evening, sahib."

Amber gasped and stared. "Eight of the . . . Let me think. Go and bring me food and a brandy-peg—or, hold on! Bring a bottle of soda water and a glass only."

The khansamah withdrew. Amber fell back with his shoulders to the wall and stared unblinkingly at the lamp. He distinctly remembered undressing before going to bed; he now found himself fully clothed. He felt of his pocket, and found the emerald ring there, instead of in its chamote case. Then it had not been a nightmare!

He had a bottle of brandy which had never been uncorked, in his traveling kit. Rising, he found it and inspected the cork narrowly to make sure it had not been tampered with; then he drew it.

The khansamah returned with the glass and an unopened bottle of Schweppes, and prepared the drink under eyes that watched him narrowly. While Amber drank he laid a place for him at the table. When he left the room a second time the Virginian produced his automatic pistol and satisfied himself that it remained loaded and in good working order.

In the course of a few minutes the native reappeared with a tray of food and pot of coffee. These arranged, he stood by the chair, ready to serve the guest. Then he found himself looking into the muzzle of Amber's weapon, and became apparently rigid with terror.

"Sahib—!"

"Make no outcry, dog, and tell me so like, if you value your contemptible life. Why did you drug me—at whose instance?"

"Answer me quickly, son of vipers!"

"By Dhala Rakah, sahib, I am innocent! Another has done these things—he who served you last night, bellah, and whose place I have taken."

Now the soles of India are many and various, so that a new specimen need not be held wonderful. But Amber sat bolt upright, his eyes widening and his jaw dropping. "Dhale—!" he said, and brought his teeth together with an audible click, staring at the khansamah as if he were a respectable specimen of prehistoric man.

"I caught a notion of the hand and a wave of the hand toward the window, warning him that there might be an eavesdropper lurking without, and very admirably to bring it about."

"That is a lie, misbegotten son of a once-eyed woman of shame! By the gateway of Kathiawar, that is a lie! Speak, brother of Jambun and Jambun

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of wine, lamb my temper overcomes me and I make carmine of you!"

"My lord; hear me!" protested the man in an extremity of fright. "These be the words of truth. If otherwise, let my head be forfeit . . . Early in the morning you returned from the lake, heavy with sleep, and so soundly have you slept since that hour that no effort of mine could rouse you, though many came to the door, making inquiry. I am Ram Lal, a true man, and no trafficker in drugs and potions."

"Even so!" said Amber, ironic. "But if, on taking thought, I find you've lied to me . . . Go now and hold yourself fortunate in this, that I am not a man of hasty judgment."

"Hooray!" Like a shadow hurried by a wind of night, the khansamah scurried from the room. But on the threshold he paused long enough to lay a significant finger upon his lips and nod toward the table.

From the khansamah's quarters came an occasional clash of crockery and patter of naked feet. Outside, in the compound, the sepoys were chattering volubly; their words were indistinguishable, but from their constantly increasing animation Amber inferred that they were keenly relishing the topic of discussion. He became sure of this when, at length, his curiosity aroused, he went to the window and peered out between the wooden slats of the blind. The little company was squinting in a circle round the fire, and a bottle was passing from hand to hand.

He turned back, puzzled, to find the khansamah calmly seated at the table and enjoying one of Amber's choicest cigarettes.

"Thank God," he said, with profound emotion, "for a civilized smoke!"

"Labertouche!" cried Amber.

The pseudo-khansamah rose, bowed formally, and shook hands with considerable cordiality. "It's good to see you whole and sound," he said. "I had to wait until Ram Nath's work began to show results. He's out there, you know, keeping the bottle moving. I don't believe those damned sepoys will bother us much, now, but we've got no time at all to spare. Now tell me what you have to tell, omitting nothing of the slightest consequence."

Amber dropped into a chair, and the Englishman sat near to him. "I say, thank God for you, Labertouche! You don't know how I've needed you."

"I can fancy. I've had a ripping time of it myself. Sorry I couldn't communicate with you safely before you left Calcutta. But we're not a minute to waste. Get into your yarn, please; explanations later, if we can afford 'em."

Labertouche, with deep enjoyment, he narrated his dark story, listening intently to Amber's concise narrative of his experiences since their parting before the stall of Dhala Rakah in the Madras bazar. Not once was he interrupted by word or sign from Labertouche; and even when the tale was told the latter said nothing, but dropped his gaze abstractedly to the smoldering stumps of his cigarette.

"And you?" demanded the Virginian.

"Have pity, Labertouche! Can't you see I'm being eaten alive by curiosity?"

Labertouche eyed him blankly for an instant. "Oh!" he said, with an effort freeing his mind from an intense concentration of thought. "What's there to tell? I've been at work. That's all. . . . I was jostled off to one side when the row started in the bazar, and so lost you."

"It may be clear to you . . ."

"See here," said Labertouche, with pardonable impatience. "I'm presuming that you know enough of Indian history to be aware that the Rutton dynasty in Khandawar is the proudest and noblest in India; it has descended in right line from the sun. There's not a living Hindu but will acknowledge its supremacy, be he however ambitious. That makes it plain, or ought to, why Har Dyal Rutton, the last male of his line, was—and is—considered the natural, the inevitable, leader of the second mutiny. It devolved upon Salig Singh to produce him; Salig Singh promised and—is on the point of failure. I can't say, precisely, what penalty he'll be called upon to pay, but it's safe to assume that it'll be something everlastingly unpleasant. So he's desperate. I can't believe he has deceived himself into taking you for Rutton, but whether or no, he intends by hook or crook to get you through this Gateway affair tonight. He's got to. Now you are—or Rutton is—known to be disloyal to the scheme. Inevitably, then, the man who passes through the Gateway in his name is to be quietly eliminated before he can betray anything—in other words, as soon as he has been put through the 'ordeal,' as they call it, for the sake of appearance and the moral effect upon the Hindu race at large. Now I think you understand."

"I think I do, thanks," Amber returned dryly. "You're quite right, as I said before. So I'm off to the residence. But how to get through that guard out there?"

"He received no response. In a little time as it took him to step backwards from Amber Labertouche had resumed his temporarily discarded masquerade. Instantaneously it was the khansamah who confronted the Virginian—the native with head and shoulders voluptuously bandaged, as one who goes in order."

Amber, surprised, started, started to speak, received a sign, and was silent, the scene for Labertouche's sudden change of attitude, being sufficiently apparent in an upsurge which had been raised without the least warning in the compound. The advent of a running horse seemed to have been resolutely fixed for a far the closer of

at the telegraph office this morning, but of course when you didn't appear I knew something was up. So I concocted a message to you for an excuse, came down, engaged the khansamah in conversation (I think he had some idea I was an agent of the other side); and . . . he is an old man, not very strong. Once indoors, I had little trouble with him. He's now enjoying perfect peace, with a rag to insure it, beneath his own charpoy. Ram Nath happened along opportunely, and created a diversion with his gin bottle. That seems to be all, and I'm afraid we mayn't talk much longer. I must be going—and, must you."

He glanced anxiously at his watch—a cheap and showy thing, such as natives delight in. Both men rose.

"You return to the telegraph station, I presume?" said Amber.

"Not at all. It wouldn't be worth my while."

"How's that?"

"The wires haven't been working since ten this morning," said Labertouche, quietly.

Amber steadied himself with the back of his chair. "You mean they've been cut?"

"Something of that sort."

"And that means—"

"That this infernal conspiracy is scheduled to come to a head tonight—as you must have inferred, my dear fellow; this is the last night of your probation. The cutting off of Khandawar from all British India is a bold move and shows Salig Singh's confidence. It means simply: 'Governmental interference not desired. Hands off.' He knows well that we've spies here, that enough has leaked out, unavoidably, to bring an army corps down on his back within twenty-four hours, if he permitted even the most innocent-seeming message to get out of the city."

Amber whistled with dismay. "And yes—"

"I'm going to find out for myself what's towards Kathiawar."

"You're going there—alone?"

"Not exactly; I shall have company. A gentleman of the Mohammedan persuasion is going to change places with me for the night. No; he doesn't know it yet, but I have reason to believe that he got an R. S. V. P. for the festive occasion and intends to put in a midnight appearance. So I purpose saving him the trouble. It's only a two-hour ride."

"But the risk?"

Labertouche chuckled grimly. "It's the day's work, my boy. I'm not sure I shan't enjoy it. Besides, I mustn't hang back where my subordinates have not feared to go. We've had a man in Kathiawar since day before yesterday."

"And if? What am I to do?"

"Your place is at Miss Farrell's side. No; you'd be only a hindrance to me. Get out of my thoughts. Three years ago I found time to make a pretty thorough exploration of Kathiawar, and, being blessed with an excellent memory, I shall be quite at home."

Amber made a gesture of surrender. "Of course you're right," he said. "You're always right, confound you!"

"Exactly," agreed Labertouche, smiling. "I'm only here to help you escape to the residence. Rutton and Colonel Farrell have already been advised to make preparations for a stage or for instant flight, if I give the word. They need you far more than I shall. It would be simple madness for you to venture to Kathiawar to night. The case is clear enough for you to see the folly of doing anything of the sort."